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7 Working with online communities: translating TED Talks

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Abstract

This project aimed to explore how online open communities and resources could be used for language learning in a higher education context. Advanced language learners were introduced to translation and subtitling, and the use of open content to maintain their language skills post-graduation whilst engaging in a meaningful activity, namely sharing knowledge through translation in a volunteer project. Students were asked to translate the subtitles of a Technology, Entertainment, and Design (TED) or TEDx Talk of their choice and to review and provide feedback on two of their peers' translations. Most students enjoyed the activity, particularly being able to choose the talk they would be translating and having access to other students and volunteers to ask questions and get support with the linguistic and technical aspects of subtitling. A small number of students found the technical aspects of the activity challenging and did not enjoy the unpredictability of working in an open community.

Keywords: open pedagogy, volunteering, translation, subtitling, language learning.

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1. Context of the project

New learning opportunities have emerged as a result of the possibilities the internet affords to connect with others with similar interests, as well as the proliferation of online tools and resources, many of them openly available. Online communities or affinity groups (Gee, 2005) can be profitably used by language educators and learners in both formal and informal learning contexts to create a learning experience that is more authentic, situated, and experiential (Kiraly, 2016; Risku, 2010) than the traditional learning activities routinely offered to learners in the language classroom. And yet, language teachers are still not making full use of these opportunities, with notable exceptions (Al-Shehari, 2017; Martínez-Carrasco, 2018; Wikipedia Education Program, 2012). In fact, it is often language learners themselves who are proactively and independently engaging with available online language learning opportunities (Rosell-Aguilar, 2016, 2018; Sauro, 2017).

The project described here uses a wide definition of open practice (Beetham, Falconer, McGill, & Littlejohn, 2012; Weller, 2017) rather than narrower definitions that focus strictly on the use of openly licensed content (Wiley, 2017). Open practice is making use of open tools and resources but here it is also about connecting with online communities that operate by taking advantage of these open tools and resources. In essence, it is about changing educational practise to involve language learners and teachers in new ways of learning that benefit from openness and the possibilities of tackling meaningful tasks outside the physical or virtual walls of the classroom.

The project recruited graduates specialising in French, German, or Spanish at The Open University, a distance learning university in the UK, who, having recently completed their studies, were interested in exploring ways of keeping up their language skills beyond formal education. A free six-week online course was provided offering three different activities based on the use of freely available online resources: a collaborative cross-language discussion on the topic of migration in Europe; a taster of Massive Open Online Courses in the foreign language; and an introduction to subtitling TED Talks.

All participants described themselves as confident online learners, which was important given that the pedagogical approach relied heavily on self-direction and independent work and the activities required quite sophisticated digital literacy skills. Participants volunteered to take part in the project and decided which and how many of the activities on offer they would complete, according to their interests and availability. This chapter deals only with the activity on subtitling TED Talks: from the 41 volunteers who signed up to the course, 15 completed the subtitling activity described in this case study.

2. Intended outcomes

The overall project used a student-centred approach that extended the supported, personalised open learning strategy already employed at the institution. A key aim was to direct learners to existing resources – in this case open tools and resources used by the TED Translators online community to translate the subtitles of TED Talks – which students could use independently to practise their language skills beyond formal education. Another key focus was to make the learning engaged and meaningful, in the sense that learners could take part in real-life tasks with real-life impacts. For the case presented here, this was achieved by working with TED Translators, an online community of “volunteers who subtitle TED Talks, and enable the inspiring ideas in them to crisscross languages and borders” ([TED, n.d.](#)).

Beyond these two overarching aims, the activity allowed learners to develop a wide range of skills, both subject specific, such as translating, subtitling, reviewing, and proofreading; and transversal, including information technology, and digital literacy and participatory skills such as online research, communication, and collaboration.

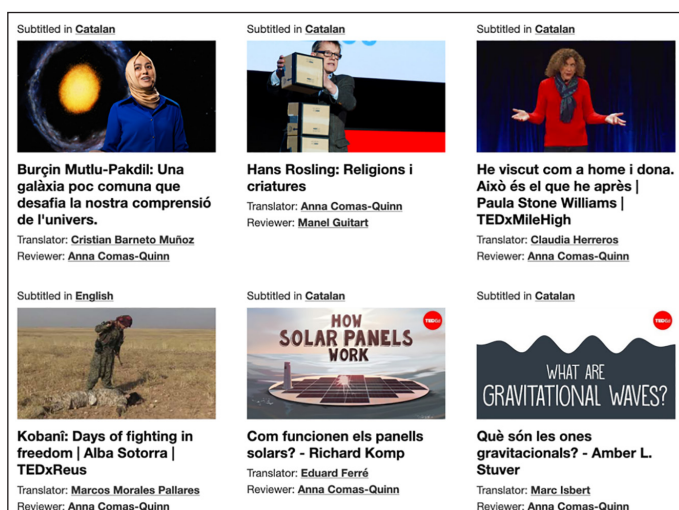
Personalisation was fundamental and was achieved by allowing students to choose the talk they wanted to translate and which language they wanted to translate from or to (in combination with English, the common language in this context). The advantage of TED Talks is that they are self-contained with content

that is very up-to-date and covers a vast range of topics. They also provide a multicultural dimension (specially TEDx Talks³ organised locally across the world) and an opportunity for learners to hear and learn from a wide variety of voices. The TED Talk, though sometimes criticised (Robbins, 2012), is well known for its predictable but engaging format and this, together with choice and the topical nature of the content, makes for an interesting and motivating activity for learners.

3. Nuts and bolts

TED Translators is a community of some 30,000 volunteers who produce subtitles in over 100 languages for TED, TEDx, and TED-Ed⁴ Talks. Anyone can join, although volunteers are asked to be fluent in at least two languages and familiar with subtitling best practice.

Figure 1. The TED Translator online profile



3. <https://www.ted.com/participate/organize-a-local-tedx-event/before-you-start/what-is-a-tedx-event>

4. <https://www.ted.com/watch/ted-ed>

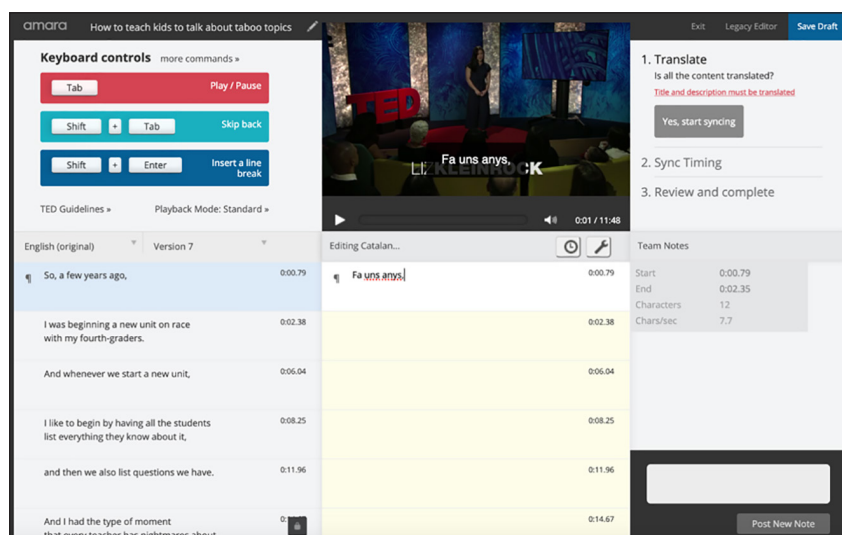
Two things make TED Translators a useful learning resource: a very well structured workflow, which follows the traditional translate-review-approve system and involves two rounds of feedback from more experienced volunteers; and well developed support resources for volunteers, including online video tutorials, subtitling guidelines, and other translation resources collected in a wiki, and language coordinators, who help other volunteers through the review process and in language-specific Facebook groups.

Another aspect that makes TED Translators attractive for language learners is the online profile that translators set up, which acts as a portfolio where volunteers' published work can be showcased (see [Figure 1](#) above).

3.1. Tools and resources

The activity was hosted on an institutional Moodle page with an associated forum where students could access support from their tutors and fellow students.

Figure 2. The Amara subtitling editor



Students needed to register with the TED Translators project and use the open source Amara⁵ online subtitling editor to translate their chosen talk (see [Figure 2](#) above). They were also directed to additional support resources (see [supplementary materials](#)). Most participants carried out the tasks using their desktop or laptop computers.

3.2. Brief description of the activity

Students were asked to translate the subtitles of one short TED or TEDx talk. In the course of six weeks, students learnt about the TED Translators community and resources, the basics of translating and subtitling, and how to use the subtitling editor Amara. They worked from and into the language of their choice in a mixed group (French, German, and Spanish in combination with English), and, with the support of the facilitators and fellow students, they discussed translation problems and choices, and reflected on the linguistic and extra-linguistic challenges posed by the activity. The activity required both independent and collaborative tasks.

In Week 1, students created their profiles in TED and Amara and learnt how to locate resources and access support groups in order to be fully equipped to start their translation. They were advised to choose a video on a topic of their interest no more than ten minutes in duration to ensure that the task was manageable within the allocated time. In addition, they took part in a forum discussion about the main principles of translation and, in particular, about translating for TED Translators.

During Weeks 2 and 3, participants worked on their translations independently, although they had the option of seeking help from both the facilitators and fellow students in the forum, and other volunteers in the TED Translators language-specific Facebook groups. Students were instructed not to submit their completed translation in the Amara platform, instead they were asked to share it through the activity forum to be peer reviewed by fellow learners.

5. <https://amara.org/en/>

Weeks 4 and 5 were devoted to peer reviewing and feeding back on each other's translations. Students were instructed to select two translations to review in their own language combination, giving priority to those that had not been chosen yet. Facilitators stepped in to provide reviews for those translations that had not been reviewed by other learners (as numbers were not even in every language). During this time, facilitators led a discussion in the forum on the differences between reviewing and assessing, how to give constructive feedback, and how to deal with reviewers' comments. This round of peer-review was designed to support students in improving their translation before submitting the final version in the Amara platform to be officially reviewed and approved for publication by other TED Translator volunteers. The inclusion of this preliminary peer-review step was considered essential given the unpredictable timings of the reviewing system in TED Translators. Experience gained through participation in TED Translators and through a previous project using TED Translators with learners in educational contexts (Cámara & Comas-Quinn, 2016) revealed that delays in the reviewing process had a negative impact on participant motivation. All tasks in TED Translators are carried out by volunteers, who chose which talks they translate or review according to their preferences and interests, and this results in some talks awaiting reviews for many months. It was therefore deemed necessary to incorporate a scheduled review step carried out by fellow learners in the design of the activity. Once their work had been reviewed by other learners and students had made the final changes to their translation, they were free to choose whether they wanted to submit their work through Amara for review, approval, and publication. This step was optional as it was considered ethically more appropriate for students to make the decision on whether they wanted to publish their work online (Martínez-Arboleda, 2013).

In Week 6, students prepared and submitted an assignment consisting of a reflection in English (800-900 words) discussing three translation problems, covering linguistic, cultural, and technical aspects they had encountered whilst completing the task.

3.3. Evaluation

The evaluation of the project was conducted through a post-course survey for which ethical approval had been secured, consisting of a total of 26 questions combining both closed (particularly multiple-choice and Likert scale questions) and open-ended questions. Although 41 of the 45 participants who joined the course had initially showed interest in this activity, time constraints led to many withdrawals from those who decided to focus on one of the other course activities. Hence the much lower number of students (15) who completed the task and responded to the survey.

The results of the survey reveal that the majority of students were very positive about the activity: all but one indicated they enjoyed ‘having choices about which online services and technologies to use’ and agreed it was an important element of this activity. In addition, although most of them had never shared their work online – with three of them having done so only through short postings – all of them reported feeling confident about publishing their translations.

The main drawback related to open content was that almost a third of students experienced some difficulties accessing content or resources related to the activity. The most common challenge reported was the complexity of the TED/Amara registration processes, as well as lack of familiarity with both platforms, which is consistent with the fact that a third encountered some or very much difficulty with technology, particularly with Amara –and just under half did not experience any difficulty at all. Regarding time, nine participants reported spending between two and four hours, and six of them between four and five hours per week working on this activity.

With regards to the learning experience itself, it is interesting to note the mixed results when students were asked to judge the level of difficulty of this activity compared to other language learning they had done at the institution at an advanced level. Half found the activity to be similar in difficulty to other work they’d undertaken in their formal studies, whilst the rest were split between those who found this activity harder and those who found it easier than their previous

experiences of language learning. This could perhaps be linked to the previous experiences that each individual student had with translation tasks or, again, with the specific technological challenges that this activity presented. Also related to the learning experience, all respondents, with the exception of one participant who encountered multiple difficulties, concluded that the activity helped them to improve their language skills. Students highlighted that the task helped them to clarify their ideas about translation and subtitling, including finding strategies for dealing with hidden meanings or learning about the importance of researching cultural references. Some participants also mentioned they liked learning about the TED Translation project and about the topic of the talk. Regarding the assignment, all students judged a reflective essay an appropriate assessment instrument. However, many other types of assessment are possible and could be more suitable in other learning contexts, depending on the focus given to the activity (translation quality, collaboration, terminology...).

Another part of the evaluation asked students about the study and transversal skills they had developed whilst working on the activity. All participants responded that ‘development of my autonomy as a learner’ was an important element of this activity and, with one exception, they declared themselves ‘confident in directing their own work’, particularly once they became familiar with TED and Amara, despite some of them admitting feeling overwhelmed, nervous, etc. at the beginning of the task. Collaboration, however, was not considered as important as ‘developing my autonomy’ in the context of this activity. Nonetheless, two thirds of participants selected positive responses to the question on the extent to which the activity had improved ‘learning with others rather than individually’ – perhaps thanks to the peer-review process they engaged in – and a similar number judged helpful or very helpful the effectiveness of support and guidance from their peers. With regards to research and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills, almost all respondents considered that the activity had helped them improve in both areas, although some of them found it more demanding in terms of ICT skills than other activities in their previous studies.

Finally, looking at motivation and enjoyment, the vast majority of students indicated they enjoyed the learning process, with two thirds choosing ‘very

much' and only one student selecting 'very little'. Amongst the aspects that students enjoyed the most were learning new skills, such as translation, subtitling, and problem-solving, making sure that the quality of the end result was good enough for public viewing and, in connection to this, the fact that the activity had a real-life impact and made a valuable contribution to society. Conversely, a simplification of the technical aspects (TED and Amara) or of the peer-review process (both the internal and the external steps) would have improved their experience.

Facilitators and task designers were also asked to give feedback on their experiences whilst running the project: on the positive side, they mentioned the activity exceeded their expectations with regards to students' collaboration, participation, and engagement, and considered it a success and a model of online collaboration. On the negative side, they expressed concerns about some students' being able to fully direct their own work. Some issues in understanding the facilitator's role were also identified, signalling that more work needs to be done to help facilitators embrace the role of supporting independent learning. With regards to this, it is worth noting that only half of the respondents engaged with the facilitators, but those who did found the support provided very helpful.

4. Conclusion

In summary, students enjoyed having choices and tackling a 'real world' task. They felt the activity supported their language development (both in their native and target languages), and the development of applied language skills in translation and subtitling, as well as digital and ICT skills. They also mentioned personal gains, such as enjoyment, the opportunity to find out about TED Translators or finding a new hobby. Meanwhile, facilitators had to deal with the tension between providing support and allowing problem-solving skills to be developed, as some students found the TED and Amara platforms complicated. This project shows that using open tools and resources, and engaging with the communities where these are used, has huge potential for language learning and teaching, both as

a way of connecting learners with real world activities that have an impact on society, and as a means of developing their language and applied skills.

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Supplementary materials

List of resources provided to students:

- TED Translators Guidelines: <https://www.ted.com/participate/translate/guidelines>
- TED Translators Subtitling resources: <https://www.ted.com/participate/translate/subtitling-resources>
- TED Translators Wiki OTPedia: <https://translations.ted.com/Portal:Main>
- TED Translators Main guide: https://translations.ted.com/TED_Translator_Resources:_Main_guide
- TED Translators generic public group in Facebook (in English): <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ITranslateTEDTalks/>

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